

**LEARNING THE HARD WAY, OR NOT AT ALL: BRITISH
TACTICAL AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATION DURING
THE BOER WAR 1899-1902**

**A MONOGRAPH
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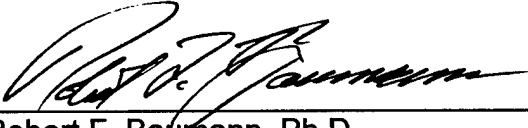
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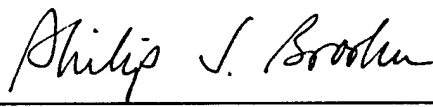
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ABSTRACT

LEARNING THE HARD WAY, OR NOT AT ALL: BRITISH STRATEGIC
AND TACTICAL ADAPTATION DURING THE BOER WAR OF 1899-1902 by Maj.
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The United States' current strategic environment is increasingly complex, with security, economic, and humanitarian interests around the world. Consequently, the United States' military may be called upon at any time to perform missions ranging from peacekeeping to total war, in environments ranging from the desserts of South West Asia to the jungles of Central America, against enemies ranging from Somali warlords to Chinese divisions. This uncertainty prevents the United States' military from organizing, equipping, and training for any specific situation. Therefore, to be successful the United States military must be capable of quickly adapting to the particulars of its mission when called.

In the late 1800's England found itself in much the same position, with its military engaged around the world protecting its diverse and widely-dispersed interests. In 1899 when it went to war against the Boers it found its military unsuited for the South African terrain, the effects of modern weaponry, and the unconventional Boer tactics. This paper examines the British military's strategy and tactics, and how they changed throughout the war. Ultimately it determines that the British failed to adapt their strategy and tactics effectively throughout the war. Although their performance varied from commander to commander, and from unit to unit, the British typically resisted change, for various reasons, even when the need for change was

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Chapter I: Introduction

“At least two years of failure and experience are needed to turn a civilian and commercial nation into a military power.”¹

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in The Great Boer War

Military Historian Michael Howard once said that, in war, “everybody starts even, and everybody starts wrong....when everybody starts wrong, the advantage goes to the side which can most quickly adjust to the new and unfamiliar environment and learn from its mistakes.”² Howard asserted that for a variety of reasons, such as the uncertain impact of technological advancements, ever-changing social and political restrictions, and the inability to experiment in the same conditions under which they must fight, armies historically enter wars without the proper structure, equipment, and training.

For the United States, in its current strategic environment, the problem of properly preparing for the next war is even more difficult. With economic and their accompanying security interests distributed literally all around the world, the United States’ military must be prepared for action against virtually any force around the world, and anywhere along the “spectrum of conflict.” With possible enemies ranging from Somalia warlords to Serbian armor formations, with potential terrains on which to fight ranging from the Iraqi dessert to the Panamanian jungles, and possible missions ranging from peacekeeping to total war, the United States military must be flexible and capable of rapid adaptation. After all, the validity of given tactics and strategies depends entirely on

the character of the opposing forces, the technical qualities of their weapons, the skill and determination of their soldiers and leaders, and the nature of the terrain.

Recognizing the importance of adaptation, Paul Davis, in the 1998 RAND Issue Paper, "Transforming the Force," stated that, "...the single most important task for Secretary of Defense Cohen and his successors over the next two decades is to transform U.S. military forces for adaptiveness in new and strategic and operational circumstances."³ In "Joint Vision 2010," General John M. Shalikashvili wrote that, "...regardless of how sophisticated technology becomes, the individual warfighter's judgment, creativity, and adaptability in the face of highly dynamic situations will be essential to the success of future operations."⁴

Fortunately, however, the United States military's position is not without precedent. In the late 1800's, with colonies, possessions, and economic interests spanning the globe, the British Empire found its military continuously in conflicts, performing a wide variety of missions against a wide variety of enemies. In 1906 Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice of the British Army expressed the difficulties that the British forces faced when planning expeditionary operations:

*"Every Army grows up according to its traditions of past history. Those of the Continent having only to cross a frontier, marked by Royal, Imperial, or Republican stones, have, in their rare but terrible campaigns, to pursue definite objects that can be anticipated in nearly all of their details years beforehand. The British Army, on the contrary, throughout the nineteenth century, has had to carry out a series of expeditions in every variety of climate, in all quarters of the globe, amidst the deserts of North Africa, the hills, plains, and tropical forests on South Africa, the mountains of India, the swamps of Burma, or the vast regions of Canada. Such expeditions have been more numerous than the years of the century; each of them has differed from the other in almost all of its conditions."*⁵

In fact, when the British government decided to wage war against the independent Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal in 1899, the forces they sent came from India, North Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and England. In addition to unfamiliar terrain and climate, these forces encountered an enemy who fought with tactics, organization, and strategy totally foreign to the British. Adding to the British forces' difficulties was the emergence of new technologies whose effects upon tactics and strategy were yet to be determined.

Blind to their difficulties and brimming with confidence, the British expected their fight against the Boers to be a quick and easy one, referring to the Boer republics as, "trumpety little States," with their, "impudent burghers," and predicting "Pretoria by Christmas!"⁶ However, the British found the Boer forces, armed with modern weapons such as magazine-fed Mauser rifles, and fighting with unconventional organization and tactics on the vast openness of the South African veld to be formidable opponents. Two months into the war, on December 10, 11, and 15, 1899 the Boers defeated the British army soundly at Stormberg, Magersfontein, and Colenso respectively. These three defeats, collectively known in England as "Black Week," demonstrated emphatically that the British forces, given their current structure and tactics, were not suited for their environment.

Did the British alter their methods and tactics during the Boer war? If so, did they do so effectively? Did they change their force structure, or adopt a new strategy, and if so, were their changes effective and made in a timely manner? This paper examines critical aspects of the Boer War, and determines whether the British forces effectively adapted as warranted by the circumstances. "Effective" adaptation for the purpose of this

paper is change that is both appropriate to the circumstances in order to achieve the desired effect, and accomplished in a timely manner.

There are too many significant differences between the technological, political, sociological conditions which currently face the United States and those which faced the British Empire at the time of the Boer War to allow the application of specific "lessons learned," or the discovery of the ideal tactics or strategy for the United States. The historical study of how a military force adapted, or failed to adapt, when confronted by an environment for which it was ill-prepared can surely assist the military planner in understanding concepts and patterns which he find useful in the conduct of his profession. For, as we will see, the Boer War offers a rare, and possibly unique example of a war in which the tactics utilized evolved from totally conventional to totally guerrilla.

To answer the questions posed earlier, this paper first introduces the theoretical concepts of adaptation and co-evolution, specifically as they apply to military forces. The paper next provides the reader with a background of the Boer war, without which analysis of the specific tactics and strategy would be meaningless. Following this, the paper determines whether the British effectively adapted their strategy and tactics as required by the circumstances. To do this, each will be analyzed, identifying areas in which they were initially ineffective, or even counterproductive, and determining whether timely and effective changes were made.

Chapter II: Adaptation and Coevolution

“The failure to absorb readily accessible lessons from recent history is in many ways the most puzzling of all military misfortunes.”

Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, in Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War.

Adaptation is the continuous process by which an individual or system changes its organization, characteristics, or methods to meet the requirements of its environment. In order for a system to make effective change, it must have the means to gain feedback from its elements and its environment.⁷ By monitoring its current status, and comparing that with its desired status, the system can detect position error. Then, after taking measures intended to remedy the position error, it compares its new actual status with its anticipated status to detect process error. This learning can be of two different types, “single loop” or “double loop” learning. “Single loop learning” is the process of detecting and correcting position error, much like the work of a thermostat which detects the ambient temperature, and if required activates a heating or cooling system. Single Loop Learning enables an organization to carry on its present policies.

“Double loop learning,” however, is the act of detecting process error. Double loop learning in an organization would determine whether or not the current processes or policies are valid.⁸ In military context, “single loop learning” would be the examination of a particular engagement to determine whether one’s forces performed their tasks

according to doctrine, and, if they did not, then making any necessary changes. "Double loop learning," on the other hand, would be the examination of the engagement to determine whether the current doctrine is sound, and making any necessary corrections if it is not.

While "learning from experience" and "learning from one's mistakes" appear to be both simple and logical, they are in practice extremely difficult. Military forces, regardless of the specialization and technological level of their weaponry and systems, ultimately comprise people. They will therefore, like all social institutions, always be vulnerable to what Peter Senge calls "organizational learning disabilities." These learning disabilities include conditions such as the leader becoming too immersed in the small details of the situation to observe the larger and more critical aspects of the events happening around him. Other prevalent learning disabilities are the tendency of the authorities to seek a scapegoat to blame and by doing so failing to determine the true cause of the problem, and the leadership yielding to pressure to produce immediate results and therefore taking action which has negative long-term effects.⁹ Possibly the most detrimental learning disability which can befall military organizations occurs when the leadership in the position to effect the required change fails to do so because their personal or professional reputation is staked to the success, or appearance of success, of the erroneous policy.

If these inhibitors of organizational learning and change were not enough, there is also a tendency only to seriously examine policy and doctrine following failure. As Edward Luttwak states,

“With victory, all of the army’s habits, procedures, structural arrangements, tactics, and methods will indiscriminately be confirmed as valid or even brilliant--- *including those that could have stood some improvement or indeed were positively harmful, but with all of their harm concealed by the undissected experience of success.*”¹⁰
(emphasis mine.)

Successful adaptation is clearly not easy. Making it even more difficult is the fact that war is fought by two sides in competition. Both sides will therefore likely be making changes simultaneously. Further complicating the task of adapting to the environment in war is the reality that the enemy will be making every effort to prevent the army from doing so, including making attempts to deprive the army from gaining accurate feedback, or even to intentionally provide erroneous feedback.

Since changes can rarely be implemented instantaneously, both of the opposing sides will be in a continuous state of change, each seeking to gain advantage over the other. Waldrop termed this action-reaction-counteraction sequence “coevolution.”¹¹ Thus, any action which one force makes which gives it an advantage will prompt a reaction from the other. Edward Luttwak, in his book, Strategy, builds on this concept in the context of military operations and strategy, adding that the more effective a given weapon or tactic used by one side is, the greater the response evoked from the other side will be.¹² For these reasons it is necessary to examine the tactics and strategy, and changes thereto of both armies in order to determine the effectiveness of the British adaptation.

Chapter III: The Setting

“A torrent is not to be impeded by reasoning. The lust for war is not to be controlled by logic, nor its gratification deterred by facts.”

John Adams

“The Road to War”

In 1652, the Dutch East India Company first established a shipping station at the Cape on the tip of South Africa. From that time until 1815 when British rule became uncontested, the British and the Dutch alternated possession of the white settlements in South Africa. After a large influx of British settlers arrived in 1820, a large cultural rift formed between the settlers of Dutch and British heritages. When the British Parliament abolished slavery in the Cape, the people of Dutch ancestry, called Boers, set out on “the great trek.”¹³ Seeking to be independent from British rule, these people made an arduous journey inland up onto the high plains, an area previously unoccupied by white people. This journey is significant in that it completed the formation of the Boer nation, giving them a link to the veld as their “fatherland” and a shared experience of hardship. They already had a common language, a belief in their common ancestry, and a common culture based around farming and religion.

England, wanting control of all of the deep-water ports which could be used for resupply along the trade route to India, decided to contest the Boers’ intentions of establishing an independent republic. Consequently, England sent troops to Durban, and,

in 1845, annexed the Natal as an English colony.¹⁴ Determined to gain their independence, wherever that may be, the Boers moved again. Upon the high plain of inland South Africa they established the two republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, whose independence England recognized in 1852 and 1854 respectively.¹⁵ However, when diamonds and gold were discovered in large quantities in the Boer republics, England once again took an interest in them.

In 1880, the Boers of the Transvaal, under Paul Kruger rebelled against England. England again recognized the Transvaal Republic's independence after being beaten soundly by them at the Battle of Majuba. In 1895, the British launched a preemptive raid into Transvaal, which was soundly defeated by the Boers at the Battle of Doornkop. These events shaped the mentality of the Boers for the upcoming war. From the Boer perspective, the war was to be waged for the very survival of their states and their way of life. They had uprooted their entire nation and moved twice, and twice the British had refused to allow them independence. Two times in the past twenty years the British had launched preemptive attacks against the Boers. To the Boers it had become painfully clear; nothing short of complete military victory would provide an acceptable solution. The British, on the other hand, had a wide assortment of motivations, but none as deep-seated as that of the Boers.

Sir A. Milner, the High Commissioner for South Africa and Lieutenant-Governor of Cape Colony sought war as a means to facilitate his anticipated rise to a higher political position. The liberals in the British government sought war on humanitarian grounds, to guarantee rights to the non-Boers residing in the republics (predominantly blacks and foreign workers in the mines). Conservatives in the government sought war as

a means to tap into the wealth coming from the gold and diamond mines (at this time, ninety per cent of the world's diamonds came from South Africa).¹⁶ Unlike the situation of the Boers, none of these causes could be considered "vital" to the survival of England by today's standards.

In May of 1899, Sir Milner and President Kruger met at Bloemfontein to conduct negotiations allegedly aimed at reaching a diplomatic solution. Neither trusted the other, and Sir Milner's personal agenda was actually to ensure that a diplomatic solution could not be reached.¹⁷ By September of that year, the British were sending units to defend Natal against possible Boer attack. It is worth noting here that although the British Parliament did not want a war against the Boers, they were so inept at diplomacy and thoroughly manipulated by those with personal or economic interests in South Africa that they repeatedly missed opportunities to achieve each of *their* political objectives without resorting to war.

Prompted by the reports of British troops arriving in South Africa, President Kruger of the Transvaal "called up" his burghers and persuaded President Steyn of the Orange Free State to do the same. In October, after the expiration of an ultimatum sent to the British demanding removal of British soldiers from South Africa, the Boers attacked, thereby initiating the war.¹⁸

The events leading up to the war set the stage for the Boer War. It is important to note the asymmetry of causes for which the two sides were fighting, with the Boers fighting for the very survival of their nation, and the British fighting for a variety of lesser causes such as economic gain, humanitarian ideologies, and international prestige. As Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz stated in his book, On War, a nation's

power of resistance is composed of the total of his materiel means, which are calculable, and the strength of his will, which is not. Concerning the strength of a nation's will, he states that, "The smaller penalty you demand from your opponent, the less you can expect him to try to deny it to you."¹⁹ During the Boer War, the British found out that the converse of Clausewitz's statement is true; if your aim is the total conquest of your opponent's nation, then he can be expected to resist you with his total means. As a result, the Boers were willing to continue to fight far longer and endure far greater hardships than the British anticipate.

Additionally, since President Kruger of the Transvaal expected for almost twenty years that he would eventually have to fight the British, he embarked on a intense program of weapons acquisition. He purchased large quantities of modern weapons, arming the Boer commandos with German Mauser rifles, 75mm and 155mm Creusot guns from France, 120mm Krupp howitzers from Germany, and 37mm Vickers-Maxim automatic guns from England itself.²⁰

The British government, however, was convinced that a war would not be necessary, believing that they could achieve their objectives through diplomacy or the implied use of force. However, as Major-General Maurice reported to the British government in 1906, "Any premature effort to place our power there [in South Africa] in a condition of adequate security tended to suggest to foreign states that the movements made were directed against the independence of the two republics; tended to shake public confidence at home, and even excite jealousy in our own colonies."²¹ Therefore, as a result of political reasons and their belief that the Boers were not a serious military

power, the British did not prepare adequately for the conflict. As we will see in the next chapter, the British lack of preparation had a direct impact on their initial strategy.

The Theater of War

Joint Pub 3-0 defines a theater of war as "that area of air, land, and water that is, or may become, directly involved in the conduct of the war."²² The theater of war for the Boer war encompassed the land regions of South Africa including Cape Colony, Natal, The Orange Free State, Transvaal and British Bechuanaland. (see map in I). The major terrain features of this vast region consisted of a narrow coastal strip around the south and east coasts, a high plateau which covered most of the Boer republics called the high veld, and the tall and extremely rugged Drakensberg Mountains which separate the high veld from the coastal strip along the east side. The Drakensberg Mountains were impassable except through a few passes, which were obviously important pieces of terrain.

There were several large rivers which were subject to flooding during the rains.²³ These rivers formed natural obstacles whose fords and bridges, especially those of the Orange River, the Modder River, and the Tulega River which run perpendicular to the north-south railways, were strategically significant terrain.

As British forces had to arrive by sea, the ports available to them were militarily significant. There were three useable ports in Cape Colony; Table Bay, East London, and Port Elizabeth. Natal, on the east coast, had one port, Durban. It is noteworthy that only Table Bay and Durban could accommodate the offload of British troop ships directly

onto pier, and these two ports had no direct line of communication by land with each other.²⁴

The existing railroad lines were also strategically significant features, connecting the major towns on the high veld with the major ports along the coast. There were five main railway lines. The Western Railway ran generally north-south, connecting Cape Town to Rhodesia. The Central Railway connected Port Elizabeth to Pretoria, via Bloemfontein and Johannesburg, and joined the Western Railway at De Aar. The East London Railway joined that port with the Central Railway at Springfontein. The Natal Railway connected Johannesburg with the port of Durban. Finally, the only railway which did not pass through British territory was the Delago Bay line which connected Pretoria to the neutral port of Lourenco Marques on the east coast of Portuguese East Africa.²⁵

Chapter IV: Analysis

British Military Strategy

"I to-day have heard a whisper that the General may be moved against his will to take early action. That much pressure is being brought to bear upon him by certain ignorant civilians is, I know, the case."²⁶

Major A. W. A. Pollock, of Prince Albert's

Somersetshire Light Infantry.

Methodology

In an attempt to present a clear vision of how the British adapted their strategy to fit the environment throughout the conduct of the Boer War, this paper examines the British strategy separate from the tactics involved whenever possible. In reality, as we know, tactics and strategy are not separate and discreet areas but rather mutually intertwined and interdependent on each other. As Max Werner once remarked, "...strategy cannot give more than tactics can execute."²⁷ However, to keep the subject matter manageable, this paper examines and evaluates the British adaptation of military strategy first, followed by their adaptation of tactics.

Discussion

Military Strategy is the "art and science of coordinating the development, deployment, and employment of military forces to achieve national security objectives."²⁸

Force development issues include the policies and practice of acquiring and training personnel, as well as the procurement and distribution of equipment. Deployment issues include the physical movement of the personnel and equipment to the location at which they must fight, and employment issues include how the forces will be used. A critically important part of military strategy is the coordination between these functions, necessary to ensure that the types of forces developed are appropriate for the location in which they will be deployed, and the manner in which they will be employed.

The adequacy of the initial British strategy can be determined using the model of “ends, ways, and means” in which the “ends” are the objectives to be achieved, the “ways” are the actions and methods used to achieve these objectives, and the “means” are the resources available. Immediately after the outbreak of the war in October, 1899, the British political ends were not clearly defined, and thus neither were the military ends.

The lack of a clearly defined endstate was caused primarily by two factors, a lack of consensus in the British government on why they were waging war against the Boers, and an overconfidence stemming from their disregard for the Boers as a potent military force. In October of 1899, when their colonies were invaded by the Boers, the British forces were outnumbered with approximately 38,000 Boers and only approximately 27,000 British soldiers in theater.* Outnumbered and unprepared, the British leadership determined that their initial objective was to defend the Natal and the Cape Colony until British reinforcements arrived.²⁹ The British War Office, confident of quick victory,

* As Maurice points out in History of the War in South Africa, Vol.I, numerical calculation of Boer strength at any time is difficult: “The Boer Army numerically was the most unstable known to history, varying in strength as it varied in fortune in the field, varying even with the weather, or with that mercurial mental condition of which, in irregular forces, the numbers present at the front best mark the barometer.”

believed that success was only a matter of sending forces to South Africa. Therefore, the British developed no version of a campaign plan, in which operations were planned and phased, with intermediate objectives which would ultimately support the achievement of the desired endstate. Consequently, the British forces in South Africa at the beginning of the war conducted uncoordinated operations with some defending what they thought to be key terrain such as mountain passes and railway bridges, and some conducting localized attacks.³⁰

These uncoordinated actions continued until 31 October when Sir Redvers Buller landed at Cape Town and assumed command of the British forces in theater. Buller quickly formulated a strategy, and promulgated a desired military endstate: British forces in control of the Boer capitals. On 2 November, the Boers laid siege to the town of Ladysmith and Sir George White's 1st Army Corps.³¹ At this point, political necessities forced Buller to make relieving the besieged forces at Ladysmith, Mafeking, and Kimberly his intermediate objectives.³²

With these "ends" determined, his options for "ways" were limited. As mentioned previously, the British had only two adequate ports through which they could introduce their forces into theater, Table Bay in Cape Colony, and Durban in Natal. From these ports the railroads provided clear lines of operations to the Boer capitals of Bloemfontein and Pretoria. Additionally, the formidable Drakensberg mountains separate these lines of operation, and prevent forces using them from supporting each other south of Johannesburg.

It is not surprising therefore, given the political insistence that the relief of the besieged forces and colonists be the first objective*, that the British “ways” were to launch three offensive operations along these lines of operations. The first offensive, led by Lord Methuen, was to be an attack along the axis of the Western Railroad, with the objective of relieving the besieged forces at Kimberly. The ultimate objective of capturing Bloemfontein. The second, led by General Gatacre, was to be an attack along the axis of the East London Railroad to the northern boundary of Cape Colony or, if practicable, to Springfontein Junction, where the East London Railroad meets the Central Railroad. This attack’s objective was initially to support the relief of Kimberly by drawing the Boer forces away from the western attack, and subsequently to continue the attack on to the Boer capitals. The third prong was to be an attack led by General Buller himself, along the axis of the Natal Railroad with the intermediate objective of relieving the over 13,000 besieged forces at Ladysmith, and the ultimate objective of capturing Pretoria.³³ Viewed together Buller’s’ ends and ways were both reasonable, which leads us to examine what “means,” or assets available Buller could employ.

Buller had in theater approximately 38,000 British soldiers and over sixty guns with which to mount his offensives. Thus, in terms of raw numbers, the British had at their disposal, not counting the besieged forces, as many men as did the Boers. Raw numbers are rarely an adequate measure of fighting potential, and that was certainly the case in this vast theater. For one thing, the unique organization and personnel policies of

* As Edward Luttwak points out in his book Strategy, a strong defense under siege can take on a disproportionately high value to the leadership of the defending side, and indeed replace all reasonable strategic considerations. The defense of the besieged forces and colonists during the Boer War became just such an event, their resistance persisting in prolonged heroic endurance, attracting public notice. The

the Boer units made the traditional calculations of force ratios virtually meaningless. The individual Boers could choose to fight, or not to fight, depending on, among other things, whether or not he agreed with the planned tactics. Additionally, as Alfred Thayer Mahan noted in 1900, "every Boer organization seems susceptible of immediate dissolution into its component units, each of independent vitality, and of subsequent reunion in some assigned place."³⁴ All of these Boer units, or "Commandos," were mounted infantry, and virtually all of the Boer burghers not only had their own horses, but were skilled at riding and caring for them.

The British, in contrast, had only one eighth of their troops mounted.³⁵ Further, there were significant differences in the capabilities of the individual British soldiers and the Boer soldiers, or burghers as they were called. At the individual and small unit level, the two armies were vastly different, as illustrated by the writings of a British officer serving in the Boer War published under the pseudonym of "Linesman,"

"....I think most soldiers would agree that if a dozen Boers and a dozen English privates were pitted against each other, say from opposite ends of a three-mile stretch of average South African country, the Britons would probably be surrounded, without, perhaps, having caught even so much as a glimpse of their opponents, unless the glimpse were given them on purpose."³⁶

Not only were the Boers more cunning and more mobile, but having grown up as frontiersmen they were also better shots with their rifles, reportedly able to "pick off British officers at 1,200 yards."³⁷ So, as General Buller began his three-pronged attack to

localities that were perhaps once quite obscure were transformed into weighty symbols, into which the reputation of military and political leaders became inflexibly invested.

relieve the besieged forces and ultimately win the war by capturing the Boer capitals, he did so with an army enlisted for the most part from the lowest classes of English society, who had no belief in the cause for which England was fighting, no familiarity with the South African terrain, and were severely disadvantaged in mobility, field skills, and marksmanship.

Not surprisingly, in December of 1899, the British were defeated soundly on all three axes. In what became known in England as “Black Week,” the British were ‘reversed’ at Stormberg on the 10th of December, Magersfontein on the 11th, and Colenso on the 15th.³⁸ Following these defeats, Buller recognized that “the War Office had sent the wrong sort of army to South Africa.” He wrote the War Office requesting the formation and deployment of a force of 8,000 “irregulars” who would be “equipped as mounted infantry, able to shoot as well as possible, and ride decently.”³⁹ With this, Buller demonstrated what he had learned. Unfortunately for the British, and Buller in particular, the British leadership in England had not learned. Instead of analyzing the ends, ways, and means to uncover the problem with the British strategy and force structure, they found it easier to blame the defeats solely on General Buller. In a classic example of what Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch call “The Man in the Dock” syndrome, the British leadership proclaimed Buller’s inadequacies the cause of the British defeats and replaced him as Commander-in-Chief with Lord Roberts.⁴⁰

Interestingly enough, despite proclaiming Buller’s poor judgment the cause of the defeats, the War Office did ultimately accept his idea of forming a force of “irregulars” from England who would serve as mounted infantry, increasing his recommended number of 8,000 to 20,000. The War Office also approved Buller’s request to raise a

force of irregulars from loyal colonists within the Cape Colony.⁴¹ In addition to altering the force structure by adding irregular, mounted infantry, the War Office also decided to increase the sheer numbers of the British forces in theater, and “flood South Africa with reinforcements.”⁴²

The British War Office had adapted. But it was by then the end of December, three months after the war had begun. Why had it taken three months for them to recognize the need for mounted infantry that could match the Boers in mobility, if not field skills? Clearly, it took a severe shock to the system, supplied to the British military system by the three separate defeats in December of 1899, to motivate change.

In addition to the change in force composition and size, Lord Roberts revised the theater strategy, changing the lines of operations. He recognized that the current combination of forces, weapons, and terrain at hand provided the defensive force with a marked advantage. Also, when allowed to choose the terrain on which to defend, the Boers were defending along rivers, and their defenses were virtually impregnable. Lord Roberts decided that he must find a way to cut his army's dependence on the railroad, for as long as he was restricted to advancing along the railroad, the Boers could hold him off at every river.

His solution was to collect enough bullock wagons and mule carts to enable his force to operate on the veld, independent of the railroad for weeks at a time.⁴³ Using this mobility, he planned to cross the Orange River along the Western Railway bridge, which was the only one still in British possession, and then to mount a cross-country attack to take Springfontein.⁴⁴ This would trap a major part of the Boer army south of the Orange

River, severing their lines of supply and communications, and provide Lord Roberts with a direct and unimpeded route to Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State.

Lord Roberts was forced to alter his plan when political interference once again necessitated the relief of Kimberly prior to any advance on Bloemfontein. In order to accomplish this without fighting a continued series of frontal attacks along the axis of the Western Railroad, Roberts sent his cavalry division under General French cross country, around the Boer flank. Following the relief of Kimberly on 15 February, 1900, Roberts turned his east towards Bloemfontein. His newly-acquired ability to move his forces across the veld independent of the railroad enabled him to surprise and subsequently capture Cronje, who had previously remarked that, "the English do not make turning movements; they never leave the railway, because they cannot march."⁴⁵ Along with Cronje, the British captured his entire commando' of approximately 5,000 burghers at the Paardeberg drift across the Modder River.⁴⁶ As Roberts anticipated, this forced the Boers defending along the Orange river to abandon their positions and withdraw to the north. This also gave the British a direct route Bloemfontein.

On the day following Roberts' victory at Paardeberg, British forces under Buller finally broke through and relieved the besieged forces at Ladysmith. With the forces at both Kimberly and Ladysmith relieved, Roberts was free to pursue the objectives which he believed would end the war; capturing the Boer capitals. By 13 March, 1900, not one month after his victory at Paardeberg, Roberts marched into Bloemfontein, capturing it without a shot being fired.⁴⁷ Roberts had based his entire military strategy on the belief that the Boers would capitulate once their capital was captured. So certain was he that he had defeated the Orange Free State by capturing the capital that he allowed a commando

of some 6,000 burghers retreating back to the north, complete with a wagon train twenty-four miles long, to pass unmolested within easy reach of his 34,000 man army.⁴⁸

Instead of seeking to destroy the remnants of the Boer forces, he sent troops out through the towns and across the veld distributing copies of a proclamation of amnesty, which promised that burghers who were "willing to lay down their arms at once and to bind themselves by an oath to abstain from further participation in the war," would not be harmed nor have their property confiscated.⁴⁹ Lord Roberts had failed to understand the Boers' collective commitment to their cause, and their resulting willingness to endure hardship and continue to fight.

Eric Hoffer, in his book, The True Believer, explores the makings and dynamics of mass movements, constructing stereotypical personality profiles of the fanatical followers of mass movements. Among his discoveries is that emigrants frequently possess the "desire for a new beginning," and the "need to feel like an accepted member of a group," which make them ideal candidates for joining mass movements.⁵⁰ The Boers in this case, Dutch settlers fleeing British subjugation, joined by French Huguenots fleeing religious persecution formed a tightly-knit and highly-religious society which placed total faith in God. A large portion of the Boers fit Hoffer's model of "True Believers," willing to make any sacrifice for the achievement of their ultimate goal: an independent Boer nation.

Instead of surrendering, the Boers held a *krijgsraad*, or war council, and decided to base their new strategy on three principles: "to weed out the men whose unreliability endangered everyone's life...to increase their mobility by abolishing the great wagon trains that made every Boer expedition into a Great Trek, and to tilt their defensive

strategy progressively away from the conventional method of trying to block or delay an invasion by fighting at the front.”⁵¹ The Boers, in response to the British adaptation, coevolved into a guerrilla force which sought to avoid conventional battles of annihilation, seeking rather to exhaust the enemy through a seemingly endless series of hit-and-run attacks against small outposts, detachments, and depots.

Lord Roberts, however, completely failed to grasp the situation. Believing that the Boer forces were “in a complete state of demoralization and collapse,” Roberts decided to “show small detachments of troops all over the country.” This, he believed, would encourage all burghers to accept the terms of the Proclamation, surrender their rifles, and return peacefully to their homes.⁵² On April 1st, a 1,500 man commando led by Christian De Wet ambushed a British force consisting of two batteries of Royal Horse Artillery, a reinforced battalion of cavalry, a brigade of mounted infantry, and parties of engineers and medical corps personnel. During this engagement at Korn Spruit, outside of Bloemfontein, De Wet’s Boers inflicted 571 casualties and captured a large number of wagons, provisions, weapons, and artillery pieces. Three days later, he attacked four companies of the 2nd Irish Rifles and a section of mounted infantry at Reddersburg. Here the Boers killed ten men before the remaining 546 surrendered.⁵³

As the Boers developed their strategy to wage guerrilla war, Lord Roberts’ continued to focus on places and structures. He rested his army, and prepared for the double “tiger-spring,” which would send a column to relieve the besieged forces at Mafeking while his main force would capture Pretoria.

His decision to focus his strategy on the capture of cities was not based on a lack of “situational awareness.” He knew that De Wet was operating against his lines of

communication with about 7,000 burghers. He knew that more burghers were joining De Wet following each of his successful raids. He still believed, however, that the loss of the Transvaal capital would persuade the Boers to cease their resistance.⁵⁴ He remained convinced despite seeing that the loss of the Orange Free State capital had not only failed to cause the "Free Staters" to cease their resistance, but may have intensified it.

On 5 June, 1900 Lord Roberts captured Pretoria, expecting the Boer forces to surrender. His reply came on 7 June when an eighty-man detachment led by De Wet struck the depot at Roodewal, killing or wounding 142 British soldiers and capturing the remaining 486. De Wet destroyed or carried off food and ammunition worth over 500,000 English pounds.⁵⁵ In fact, Boer guerrilla forces were operating all around the periphery of Roberts' army. Roberts was faced with a strategic dilemma, if his forces remained massed, the Boers would interdict his long and vulnerable supply lines, yet if his forces dispersed, the highly-mobile Boers could unite at a place of their choosing and overwhelm any of the British outposts, garrisons, or depots at will.

Since the Boers continued to resist after the capitals of both of their republics had been captured, Roberts should have realized that his strategy was flawed. Roberts proved unable to conceive of any other "defeat mechanism"* other than the capture of the Boer infrastructure. He then focused on the last 250 miles of railroad, and the town of Komatipoort, with the belief that if he held all of the railroad, the Boers would cease resistance. On 23 July, 1900 Roberts' army set out on the attack, and one day later they marched into an abandoned Komatipoort.⁵⁶

* The "defeat mechanism" is the singular action which, when accomplished, ensures the success of a course of action. FM 101-5-1.

Although the capture of Komatipoort did not compel the Boers to surrender, Roberts declared that, "all organized resistance of the two republics might be said to be ceased."⁵⁷ In November of that year, Lord Roberts was unable to think of a new strategy which could compel the Boers to surrender. Consequently, he declared that he had won the war, appointed Lord Kitchener the Commander-in-Chief of all forces in South Africa, and returned to England.⁵⁸ His declaration of victory caused celebration in England, but was met with skepticism by the soldiers remaining in South Africa. The attitude was summarized by two letters written during this period. The first one written by a British trooper said, "... 'the war is over,' for do not the month-old papers we receive from home persistently call our attention to this, to them, patent fact? ...yet I am writing this with a loaded rifle by my side, and with the sound of rifle fire in my ears. 'The war is over' but it is not quite so obvious, however, out here."⁵⁹ The second one written by Boer Commandant De Wet in response to the British Proclamation, saying, "May I be permitted to say that your Excellency's jurisdiction is limited by the range of your Excellency's guns."⁶⁰

So as Lord Kitchener took over, the British expectation was that the war was over. Consequently, England began standing down her military. Large numbers of British troops were sent back to England. The officers and agents responsible for purchasing horses and mules in Europe, Australia and the Americas were ordered back to England. And as this all was occurring, the Boers were waging a disorganized but effective guerrilla war throughout both of the former republics as well as occasionally in Cape Colony.⁶¹

Faced with this situation, Lord Kitchener's first strategy was to solve the problem diplomatically. Kitchener arranged for former Boer generals who now favored surrender, including Christian De Wet's own brother Piet, to approach the current Boer leadership and initiate political dialogue. After the first two to approach the Boer leadership were declared traitors, flogged and executed, Kitchener abandoned this approach.⁶² Kitchener still pursued a diplomatic solution, however, and found that he was forced to argue equally hard with Sir Alfred Milner, the High Commissioner of the Colonies, and the English politicians in London as he did with the Boers. As a result, the guerrilla war raged on with no sign of diplomatic end.

Realizing that he must find a military solution, Lord Kitchener developed a three-part strategy:

1. Relentlessly pursue the guerrilla commandos wherever they go, with success measured in a weekly "bag" of killed, captured, or wounded.
2. Sweep the countryside bare of anything which provides support to the guerrillas, including cattle, sheep, grass, farms, women, and children.
3. Secure his lines of communication by establishing a series of "blockhouses" at intervals along the railroads.⁶³

Lord Kitchener's strategy, although correctly referred to as "barbarous," was sound, in that his ends, ways, and means were all consistent with one another. His ends were clearly to force the Boers to cease resistance through *military* action. His ways were to simultaneously pursue and attack the guerrillas while removing their sources of supply and protecting his own. His means were to use his infantry, which would be ineffectual at pursuing the guerrilla bands anyway, to man the blockhouses, while his cavalry,

yeomanry, and mounted infantry pursued the guerrillas. By clearing the countryside of the farms and families, the British deprived the Boer guerrillas of the source of intelligence which is so vital to guerrillas. Additionally, Lord Kitchener permitted the use of Bantus as guides and trackers. These natives were so skilled at tracking the Boers that the latter could not safely camp in the same location for more than one night. Lord Kitchener's strategy for defeating the Boer guerrillas was brutal and slow, but effective. On 31 May, 1902, after 32 months of war, the Boer leaders surrendered to the British and ended the war.⁶⁴

c. Evaluation

Over these 32 months, the nature of the war, as well as, the British military strategy also changed significantly. The first major change to the British military strategy was motivated by a noted lack of mobility on the part of the British forces. They adapted by altering their force structure, significantly increasing the mounted infantry and adding the irregular yeomanry. This change was effective, providing the British generals with some forces whose mobility could match that of their adversary. This change was not timely, however, and was only initiated following the dramatic defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein, and Colenso which all occurred within one week. The British should have learned the importance of mounted troops after the October battles. They did not, however, most likely because they ended up winning those battles, and, as Luttwak, Cohen, Gooch and others point out, victories tend to be celebrated while defeats tend to be analyzed.

The next major change in the British strategy, came as a result of Lord Roberts' realization that with the new inventions such as magazine-fed rifles and smokeless powder, the defense was much stronger than the offense at the tactical level. His adaptation, revamping his logistical support structure to enable him to cut his operational tether to the railroad and attack across the veld, was both effective and timely. This adaptation surprised the Boers, and accounted for the British victory at Paardeberg, their most-impressive of the war.

The British success at Paardeberg, viewed in retrospect, did not have the decisive effect that it easily could have. This is because the British failed to continue to adapt. Lord Roberts continued to believe that the key to victory was the conquest of cities. The town of Paardeberg, a small insignificant place, meant nothing to the Boers. What almost drove the Orange Free State out of the war was the surrender of Cronje and his commando. The British failed to realize that the Boer leaders, and the guerrilla forces themselves were the keys to victory. On three occasions, at Bloemfontein, Pretoria, and at Komatipoort, Roberts allowed the Boer leaders to escape with their forces when he could have easily defeated them. He did so in each case because he believed capture of the city was important, and capture of the forces not. This failure to adapt prolonged the war for two years, and cost the British more casualties than they suffered in the entire first year.

The last major change in the British strategy was by far their most effective. Lord Kitchener finally adopted a "force orientation," focusing on the capture or killing of the Boer leaders and their guerrillas. His approach was to maintain a relentless pressure on the guerrilla forces by using his mobile forces, to deprive them of any support by clearing

the veld of all farms, livestock, families, and even grass, while he protected his own support system by establishing blockhouses along the railroads. Although his strategy was deliberate and did not end the war quickly, he quickly realized what had to be done, and initiated the change. He was forced to find a purely-military solution to the problem, and he did it quickly and effectively.

In summary, the British commander-in-chief in South Africa dictated the military strategy. Like any function performed by humans, the qualities and character of the individual concerned determined the strategic adaptiveness of the organization. General Buller made effective, but not timely change. Lord Roberts made some effective change, but failed miserably when it mattered. Lord Kitchener made timely and effective change. Going back to the second chapter, the British lacked a system outside of the commander-in-chief, which could perform "double loop learning," and detect when the policy itself is in error.

2. Tactics

“Tactics favour the regular army while strategy favours the enemy--- therefore the object is to fight, not to manoeuvre.”

Colonel C.E. Callwell, in Small Wars; Their Principles and Practice.

a. Methodology

The previous section dealt with how the British structured their forces, and how they employed them to achieve the overall objectives of defeating the forces of the two Boer Republics. This section deals with how the British commanders employed their forces in the actual engagements. It first examines the tactics utilized by the British troops in the initial battles of the war, Talana Hill and Elandsplaagte, to determine whether or not change was required. Then the British tactics utilized at the battles over the Tulega River are examined to determine whether changes were made to the British tactics and, if so, how effective they were.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Boer forces gradually evolved their tactics and strategy as the war progressed, leading finally to total guerrilla warfare. This section will determine the timeliness and effectiveness of the British tactical response to this shift in Boer tactics by comparing the British counter-guerrilla tactics used in 1900, 1901, and 1902.

b. Discussion

The Battle of Talana Hill was one of the first engagements of the Boer War. The British forces, led by General Penn Symmons, were defending the garrison at Dundee (see map in appendix II). On the night of 19 October, 1899, General Symmons learned of an impending attack by three Boer commandos advancing from the north and east. General Symmons forces consisted of 3,280 infantry troops, 497 cavalry troops, and eighteen guns. The anticipated Boer strength was between 3,000 and 5,000 mounted burghers, but less than 1,000 of them actually participated in the conflict.⁶⁵

In response to the warning of attack, General Symmons established a picket at the junction of the road and a track leading to Vant's Drift, and allowed the rest of his force to sleep. That night the Boers moved in, ran off the picket, and established positions on the Lennox Hill and Talana Hill, about a mile and a half southeast and east of Dundee respectively. When a member from the routed picket informed General Symmons of the Boer attack, he ordered two companies to attack, leaving the rest of his camp asleep.⁶⁶ At sunrise, the two British companies fired at the Boers, who now possessed both prominent hills, while the rest of Symmons' force conducted their normal routine completely unaware of the Boers' presence. They first became aware of the situation when the Boer artillery commenced a bombardment.⁶⁷ At this point, General Symmons formed a plan, the infantry would assault the Boer position on Talana Hill. For the assault, Brigadier-General Yule lined up the companies as if they were on parade. As soon as they marched into the open, the Boer rifle fire began destroying them. On their own, the British infantry began to run, and those who could make it collected in some wooded cover. Rallied by the personal example set by Yule, the British infantry eventually stormed the hill through repeated and bloody assaults.

At Elandslaagte, like at Talana Hill, the British greatly outnumbered the Boers. Also, as at Talana Hill, the Boers established themselves on the dominant high ground. Here also the British infantry advanced in column and line and suffered tremendous casualties. In the end, the infantry charged with bayonets, only to find the Boers riding away. Unlike Talana Hill, however, the British cavalry here pursued the Boers, catching them completely by surprise and inflicting great casualties with their lances.⁶⁸

The effects of modern rifles became apparent during these two battles: the improved accuracy and range enabled Boer riflemen to hit targets at over 1000 meters, their magazines enabled a rifleman to fire five rounds in a matter of seconds, and their smokeless powder enabled the riflemen to remain concealed during firing. Clearly the British tactics were in need of change. German officers who had witnessed or heard about the engagements quickly declared the British infantry attacks "first class funerals."⁶⁹ It seems impossible to think that anyone would not have realized prior to the war that cavalry armed with lances would be destroyed by modern rifles and howitzers. Surely after experiencing battles fought with modern weapons the British would adapt.

At the time, the British strategy remained place-oriented, driving to relieve the forces under siege, and ultimately capture the Boer capitals. Conversely, their tactics were very force-oriented, with the British leaders feeling compelled to assault the Boers wherever they defended. As a result, the British forces found themselves continually at great tactical disadvantage. The Boers, knowing the strategic thrust of the British, were free to choose the terrain on which to fight, and almost always occupied terrain which offered them great tactical advantage.

In mid-December, 1899, General Buller led his force of approximately 21,000 northwards toward the Tulega River. His force consisted of four infantry brigades, three regiments of mounted infantry and cavalry, three squadrons of irregular mounted units, five artillery batteries (30 guns) and sixteen naval guns from HMS *Terrible*.⁷⁰ Their objective was to relieve the besieged forces at Ladysmith. His intelligence reports indicated that there were approximately 5,000 Boers defending along the Tulega River in the vicinity of Colenso.

The Tulega River itself was a fast river coming down from the Drakensberg Mountains, and could only be crossed in this vicinity at the wagon bridge and three drifts (see the map in appendix III). The terrain and Boer defensive position was best described as published in an article by Bennet Burleigh, a Special War Correspondent of "The Daily Telegraph," and witness to the battle,

"A little way north of the banks of the Tulega stretches an extensive range of bold, lofty ridges trending east and west. These walls...command the river and the valley lands lying near the river. Southward from the Tulega is a wide, treeless area- a sort of South African downs- of low, smoothly rounded uplands, sparsely covered with grass. Naturally difficult of access, the Boers for weeks past, by means of every device known to military engineers, had so strengthened the position as to make it almost unassailable except at terrible risk and cost."⁷¹

Reading the description given by one who was present is important, as we know that the British should have been expecting a tough fight. Certainly, the tactics which they utilized at Colenso could not be considered atypical due to their being caught unaware.

General Buller's plan called for one brigade each to cross at the bridge and at Bridle Drift, while the other two brigades move into positions on the east flank and between the two crossings respectively. The mounted brigade was ordered to take one battery of artillery and establish firing positions on Mt. Hlangwane which could support the crossings.⁷² On 15 December, 1899, the British attacked, initiating the battle with an artillery barrage at first light.

Throughout the bombardment the Boers remained hidden, and never returned fire. Major-General Hart, leading the brigade tasked with attacking across Bridle Drift, advanced into battle with his infantry battalions in close order, "as though it were an ordinary parade on the barrack square."⁷³ When they were close enough, the Boers, who were still undetected, opened fire and decimated the British. The British had again advanced in formation, with no scouts or skirmishers to locate the enemy defenses, and as one witness remarked, "Unfortunately, it had not been suspected that the enemy had ventured to construct cover upon the south side of the river."⁷⁴ This comment is especially telling of the incompetence of the British methods. The British, who claimed to be under surveillance from the Boers on the north side of the river, failed to notice Boers cross the river en masse, and establish prepared fighting positions on the British side. It was now December, and the British had apparently learned nothing.

An article, written by a reporter who witnessed the battle and published the following day in an English newspaper, said, "...my own view is that.... the system of rushes from cover to cover by small squads is far less wasteful of life."⁷⁵ Thus, excluding the British officers, everyone who observed the action, including foreign observers and war correspondents, correctly realized that the British tactics needed to be changed.

Additionally, as the anonymous author of the book, Words By An Eyewitness, accounts, the British enlisted men did also; "Where will British privates not rush at the word of Command? and, in the name of pity, why are such commands given? Men must of course be asked to dare much in battle; but most soldiers will agree with me that in this campaign the knowledge that our soldiers *will* dare all has too often caused them to be sent to do it without sufficient justification."⁷⁶

At the individual-soldier level the British learned. The soldiers dutifully obeyed their officers, marching in formation into battle. However, once their formations began receiving fire well-aimed fire from the Boer Mauser rifles, the soldiers individually ran and sought cover. These men, unfortunately were not the ones authorized to change British tactics. The British officers had been taught one way, and appeared unwilling to change.

Indeed at Colenso, just as all of the battles which had preceded it in the war, the British made no attempt to deceive their opponents. They utilized no indirect approach, only a straightforward attempt to overpower the Boer forces. With a seemingly complete disregard for operational security, the British announced their plans to the media, who published them in the papers prior to the event.⁷⁷ The Boers, who placed a high priority on intelligence, were thus well informed about the British intentions, both by Boer sympathizers on the veld and by the British statements in the newspapers.

The failure to prevent disclosure of their own plans and disposition was not the only British security failure however. The British made little attempt to gain intelligence concerning the Boer plans and disposition. This lack of scouting, coupled with the Boer

tactic of remaining silent and concealed, resulted in the British forces continually being surprised, and the Boer forces gaining the initiative, *even in the defense*.

The British therefore, had not significantly changed their tactics from the beginning of the war up until the battle of Colenso, three months later. However the battles of Colenso, Magersfontein, and Stormberg were all resounding defeats. If these defeats motivated the British to change their tactics, their performance at the Battle of Belfast, which was fought eight months later, should have reflected it.

The Battle of Belfast, beginning on 27 August, 1900, was the last of the battles between the conventional armies. The Boer forces, led by Commandant Botha, occupied positions astride of the railroad between Pretoria and Lord Roberts' objective, Komatipoort. The Boer force numbered approximately 7,000, and possessed twenty pieces of artillery. The Boer defensive front extended almost twenty miles, and was protected on its north and south flanks by rugged ravines and impassable bogs respectively.⁷⁸

As usual, the British forces, totaling 19,000 men, greatly outnumbered the Boers. However, only about one quarter of the British soldiers were mounted, so the Boers again possessed the advantage in mobility. At Belfast, however, the British advanced with mounted security detachments extended to the flanks, the front and the rear. These security detachments, armed with new machine guns, prevented the Boer parties from interfering with the British main body. Additionally, by clearing the zone of Boer scouts, the security detachments denied the Boer leaders exact knowledge of the British intentions and plans.⁷⁹

The British were not only taking measures to deny the Boers *accurate* information, but starting with the battle of Paardeberg were taking measures to provide the Boers with *false* information. Prior to that battle, Lord Roberts provided war correspondents with misinformation, specifically informing them not to pass it on. As he predicted, the thought that the information was sensitive only made the journalists report it that much sooner. Additionally, Lord Roberts utilized a method of deception of issuing bogus orders to his subordinate commanders in the "clear" over the telegraph wire and then canceling them with encrypted messages. The British utilized deceptive measures during the battle as well, conducting feints to get the Boers to expose and shift their defenses.⁸⁰

In addition to utilizing security detachments and deception to deny the Boers accurate information, the British also began sending reconnaissance detachments out to locate and gain information on the Boer defenses.⁸¹ As a result, as General Buller did at Belfast, the British were often able to locate a Boer weakness in their defensive position prior to the attack. In their assault on the Boer position, the British also demonstrated a new skill. Their artillery, previously used only in counter-battery roles and in ineffectual bombardments against the Boer positions prior to the initiation of the infantry attack, began working in coordination with the infantry. By locating the artillery batteries behind hills, and firing utilizing observers and aiming stakes, the artillery was able to continue suppressive fires against the Boer defensive positions, preventing the Boer artillery from massing on the British infantry during their assault.⁸²

Additionally, the British infantry demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated, small-unit tactics. By advancing in small units, utilizing cover and concealment, with all

other units providing fires to suppress the enemy while one unit rushes, the British were able to reduce significantly the casualties they suffered during the assault.

Thus we see that after ten months of combat, the British had effectively adapted their tactics to succeed against the Boers in the South African terrain. However, as is usually the case in combat, the Boers were quick to realize that the new British tactics placed the Boers at a disadvantage. Consequently, in response to the effective British adaptation, the Boers changed their tactics, thereby validating Mitchell Waldrop's concept of coevolution. Realizing that they could not defeat the British, who vastly outnumbered them and who now utilized effective offensive tactics, the Boers resorted to guerrilla tactics.

The Boer guerrilla tactics, as described by Christian De Wet, the most effective of all Boer leaders, were performed by small bands of 100 to 300 burghers, each operating independently, primarily in its own district. These bands maintained close contact with each other, and would rapidly unite when a target such as a British supply convoy would present itself. For security the bands sent out one-man patrols to locate the British and provide warning of attack.⁸³

Due to their mobility, the British dependence on the railroads for supplies, and the accessible intelligence from the farms throughout the veld, the Boer guerrillas were initially extremely effective. In March, 1900, De Wet, who had been advocating guerrilla tactics to the Boer leaders since the beginning of the year, led a guerrilla force of 350 men on an ambush of an English force of 1,800 cavalry, mounted infantry, and artillery under the command of General Broadwood. In what became known as the battle of Sannah's Post, the Boer guerrillas inflicted 159 casualties on the larger British force,

captured 421 men and eighty-three wagons full of supplies, at a cost of only three Boers killed and another five wounded.⁸⁴

On May 27th, De Wet captured a convoy, netting 160 prisoners and fifty-six wagons full of supplies, without even firing a shot. In June he raided the Railway station at Roodewal, killing or wounding 142 British soldiers, capturing 486, and destroying all that he could not carry off of half a million pounds' worth of supplies.⁸⁵ These raids are noteworthy for their successes, but typical of the guerrilla operations that the Boers were conducting more and more frequently. The success of the Boer guerrilla operations drew a quick response from the British.

One of the first British adaptations was to mimic the Boers' guerrilla tactics. Colonel Steinacker, a former officer of the German Imperial Army, recruited and formed a 600-man force of mounted irregulars who rode from the Natal, through Zululand and Swaziland, into the Transvaal. Once there, they conducted ambushes and raids against the Boer line of communication connecting the Transvaal with the neutral port of Delagoa Bay.⁸⁶ The success of Colonel Steinacker's cavalry had little impact physically, as the Boers imported very little by this time in the war. They did have a large effect on the British morale, however, giving the British the feeling that, if they so desired they could "out-Boer the Boers."

However, after seizing Komatipoort, and realizing that the Boers were not prepared to surrender, the British realized that additional changes would be required. The British initiated the policy of escorting every convoy with cavalry or mounted infantry, and establishing a garrison at every major railway station, bridge, or town. This was ineffective because, once Komatipoort had been captured and Lord Roberts had declared

victory and gone home, England redeployed a significant percentage of her troops.⁸⁷ As a result, there was simply too much area to cover, and the British forces were spread too thin. The Boers, able to choose the time and place of attack, found it easy to join separate commandos for a raid and overwhelm the isolated and numerically inferior British forces.

Lord Kitchener, who inherited command upon the departure of Lord Roberts, approached the problem differently than his predecessor. Lord Roberts had been extremely lenient with the Boers, in hopes that they would choose to lay down their arms out of reason. Lord Kitchener, on the other hand, quickly realized that no amount of leniency would entice the Boer "true believers" into surrendering. He initiated a program aimed at destroying the Boer guerrillas support structure. British troops began burning any farm which supported, or was believed to have supported Boer guerrillas. Once again, this adaptation was initially effective, and the Boer guerrillas did not like it.

As Edward Luttwak instructs us, however, the more effective a tactic is, the greater will be the enemy's motivation to develop a counter. The Boers did exactly that, and began conducting their raids from the farmhouses of the Boers who had either ceased hostilities and taken an oath of allegiance to Britain, or were actively assisting the British. By doing so, the guerrillas not only spared the farms of those who supported them, but effectively coerced the "disloyal" Boers into refraining from assisting the British.⁸⁸

Frustrated by the British forces' inability to capture the Boer leaders and their commandos, and the inability to differentiate between pro-British and pro-Boer farm (and the same farm often changed from one allegiance to the other depending on whose forces were present) Lord Kitchener initiated a three-part operation which he believed would drive the guerrillas to surrender. The first part of his plan was to relentlessly pursue the

Boer commandos utilizing highly-mobile "flying columns." To man these flying columns, Kitchener formed units of irregulars, most of whom were "colonials," who not only knew the terrain, but could speak Dutch, some African languages, and ride as well as the Boers.⁸⁹ By coordinating the pursuit with multiple units, these flying columns tracked the Boer commandos during the day, and identified where the guerrillas were bivouacking for the night. Another flying column would then attack the Boers in the middle of the night.⁹⁰

The second part of Lord Kitchener's plan was the establishment of a series of small fortifications, called "blockhouses" all along the railway. These fortifications, consisting of two sections of pipe with diameters of ten and twelve feet respectively stacked on their ends concentrically, with the space between them filled with dirt and rocks, were spaced normally 500 meters apart. By the end of the war, the blockhouses numbered over 8,000, and covered over 3,700 miles of railway.⁹¹

The third part of Lord Kitchener's plan consisted of a systematic destruction or removal from the veld of anything which may provide support for the guerrillas. Farms were burned, livestock slaughtered, grass on which the horses could graze burned, and the Boer families removed and imprisoned in concentration camps. While these tactics did severely degrade the guerrillas' effectiveness, they did not compel them to surrender. The Boer commandos were still able to evade their hunters. Given time, Lord Kitchener's tactics might have succeeded without further adaptation. British political leadership, however, did intervene, thus forcing Lord Kitchener to change his tactics again.

While the exact number of Boers who died in the British concentration camps is still debated, all agree that the total is over 20,000, of whom 75% were women and children. When the horrors of the concentration camps became public knowledge in England, the British leadership demanded reform. Lord Kitchener, complying certainly with the letter, if not the spirit, of the guidance, began releasing the Boer women and children. His forces continued to burn and destroy the Boer farms, but did not imprison the families. This tactic, he correctly predicted, had a direct military benefit.⁹²

During the earlier practice, when the families were imprisoned, the Boer guerrilla was embittered, *and relieved of the responsibility of providing for them*. As a result of Lord Kitchener's new method, the guerrilla forces were forced to either abandon their families on the veld, or to bring the families along with the guerrilla commandos. This greatly reduced the commandos' mobility, and further contributed to the flying columns' ability to catch them. These tactics, used in combination, proved to be effective, and on 31 May, 1902, the Boers finally surrendered and ended the war.⁹³

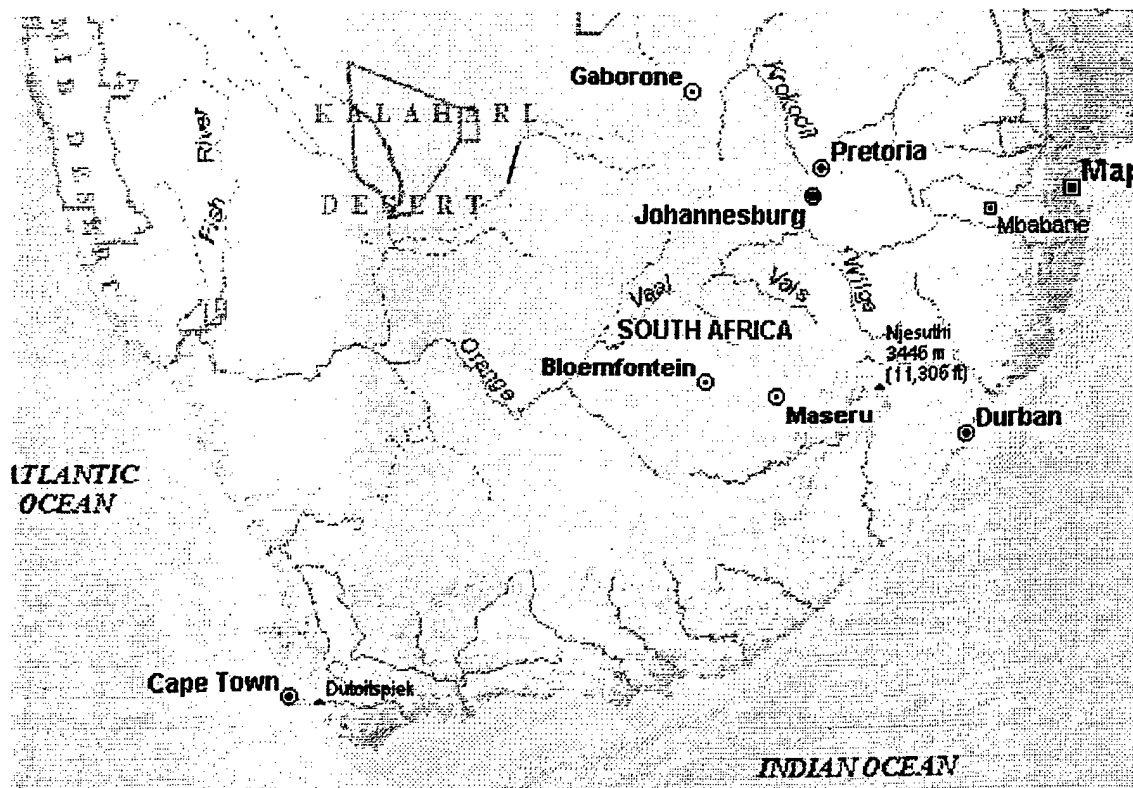
Throughout the war's three years, the tactics utilized by the British forces changed a great deal. They progressed from an army that marched into battle as if on parade and launched cavalry charges armed with lances to one capable of winning conventional battles using effective coordination between artillery, infantry, and mounted forces, as well as capable of conducting effective guerrilla and counter-guerrilla operations. However, the British, as a general rule, were not quick to change. As late as mid-1900 the British commanders were still conducting unsupported infantry assaults, designed to defeat the "invisible" Boers with élan and the bayonet charge. Britain's eventual acceptance of "irregulars" was a turning point in their tactical adaptation. The British

officers, trained and disciplined at Aldershot, remained reluctant to change throughout the war. The colonial officers, in contrast, were much quicker to adapt to the situation facing them. This concept is worth noting, at what point do standard operating procedures become counterproductive, stifling initiative and adaptation? In the world of uncertainty that characterizes all wars, how can leaders be trained and influenced to choose the course of action that intuitively seems correct, even when it is in direct opposition to the safe, approved method which can be defended with FM's?

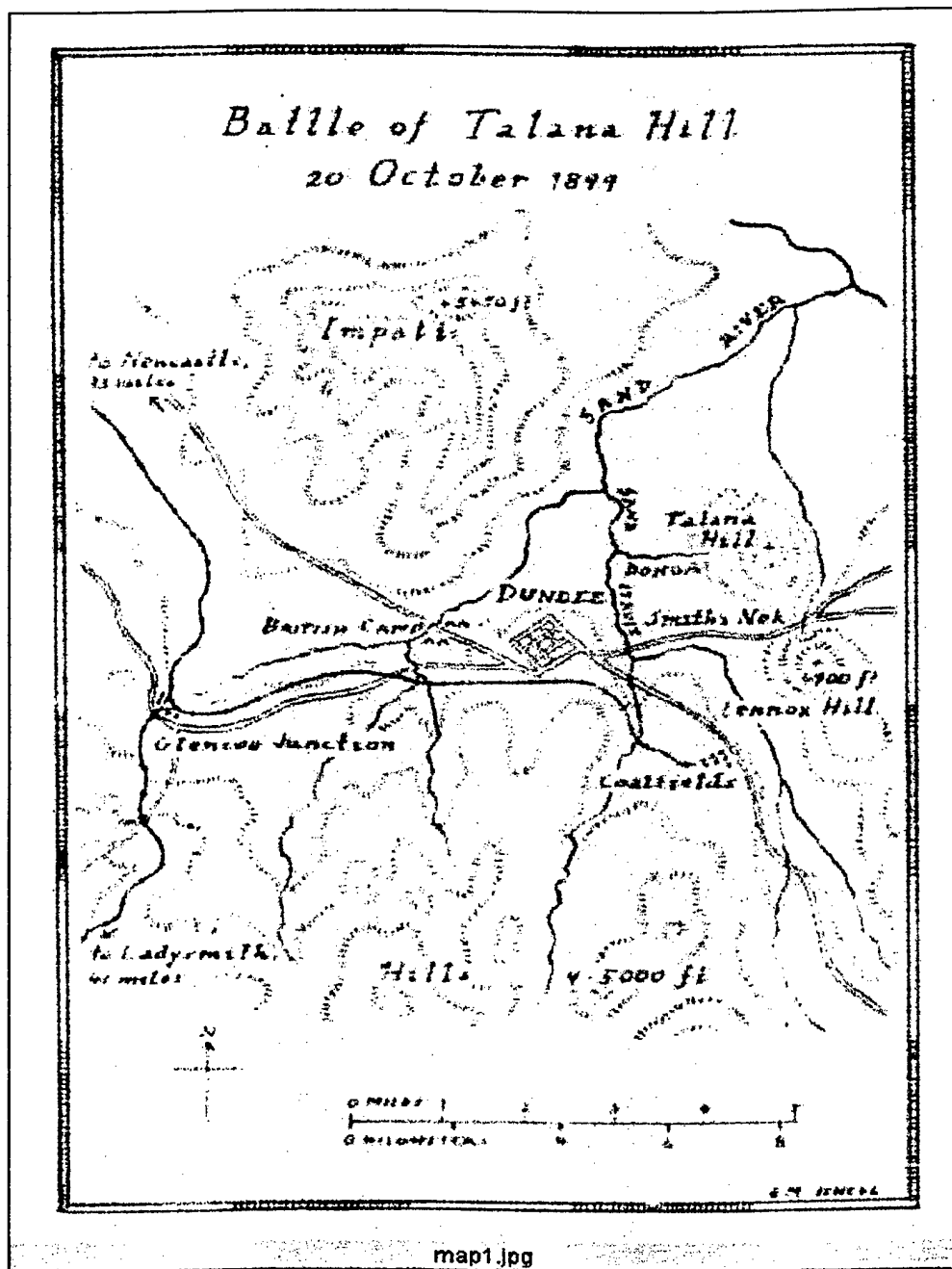
Lord Kitchener appears to be the only British leader who was able to adapt his tactics effectively, and in a timely manner. It may also be worthy of note that he is often not remembered as one capable of changing his methods as the situation required, but rather as a perpetrator of the inhuman cruelties surrounding the concentration camps. The conflict between the brutal requirements to arrive at a military solution and the political desires for civility are likely to be a concern for more military leaders in the future.

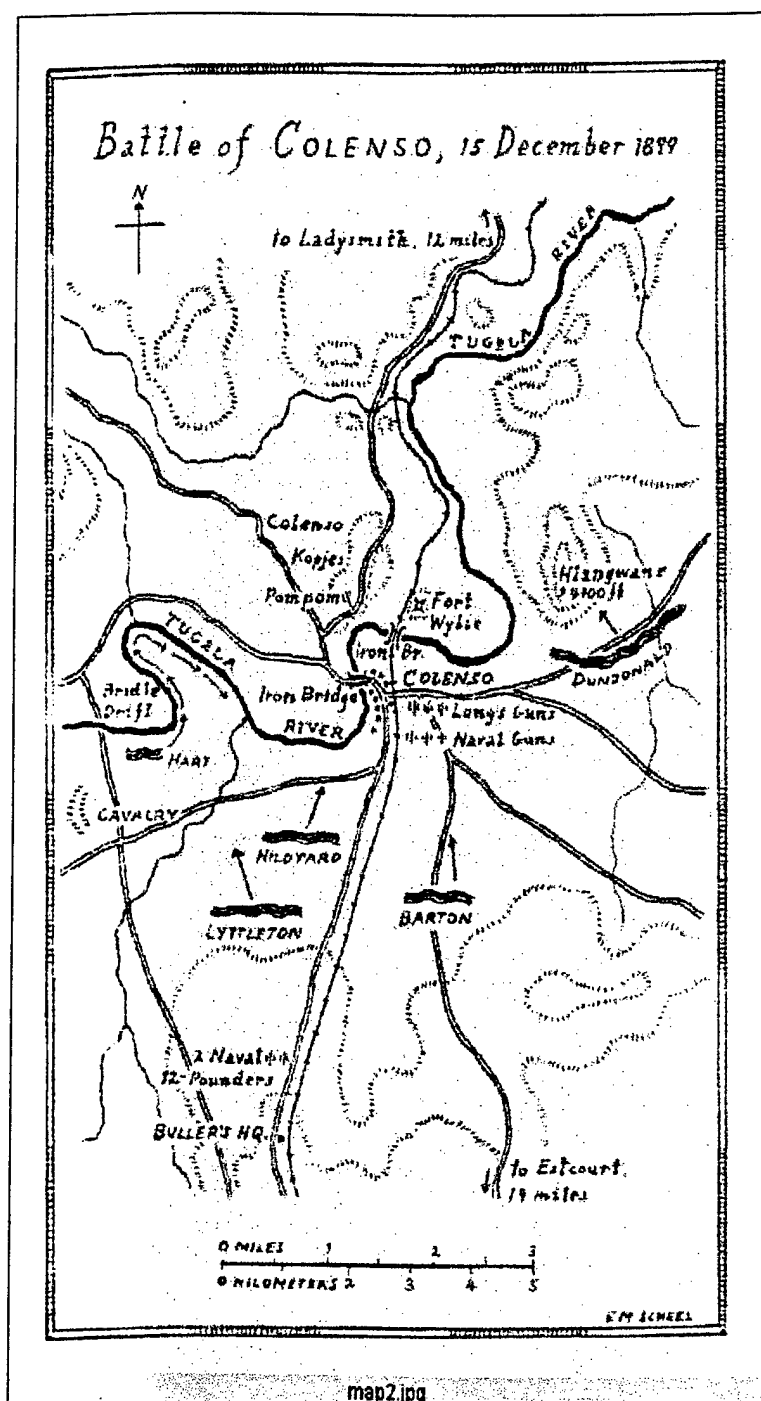
Theater of War

The Boer War, 1899-1902



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Notes

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